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Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 May 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Situation of the internally displaced Rohingya in Myanmar

Society for Threatened Peoples is deeply concerned by the human rights and humanitarian situation of stateless Rohingya in Arakan/Rakhine State, Myanmar and in the neighboring countries.

Since June 2012 systematic and pre-planned anti-Muslim attacks have left more than 145,000 Rohingya in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) and have produced over a million Rohingya refugees.

The anti-Islamic rhetoric led by the infamously well-known monk Wirathu and the Buddhist nationalist 969 Movement is fueling religious hatred all over the country. The government of Myanmar, despite the pressure from the international community, not only has done little to ensure and protect the basic rights of the Rohingya religious minority but it is also protecting Wirathu and the 969 Movement.

In January, the humanitarian situation in Arakan/Rakhine and the plight of the Rohingya got worse. Du Char Yar Tan a village in Arakan/Rakhine State was attacked and looted by an extremist Buddhist mob. 48 Rohingya were killed and many others injured. The international NGO and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Doctors without Borders (MSF) reported that 22 patients were treated near Du Char Yar Tan village for severe injuries. Despite UN allegations about the incident and international pressure advocating a fair and impartial investigation, the Myanmar government refused to allow for one and proceeded with an internal investigation.

After a month, in March 2013, the government officially denied that any massacre had taken place in Du Char Yar Tan the and openly accused MSF of falsely reporting and endangering regional stability. Several protests were staged by Buddhist Arakan/Rakhine residents against MSF because of its alleged "bias" in favor of the Rohingya minority and of diffusing false information to the UN.

Using the excuse of the expiration of the memorandum of understanding the government of Myanmar banned MSF from the region, thus depriving the Rohingya of their only healthcare provider.

Banning MSF from the Arakan/Rakhine State was just one of the many attempts by the government to deny any help to the Rohingya Muslim minority and to cover up human rights violations that are amounting to crimes against humanity in Arakan/Rakhine State.

At the end of March 2014, just few days before the badly-needed and badly-organized census, an Arakanese Buddhist mob attacked homes and offices of humanitarian aid workers in Sittwe. The violence erupted when local resident observed a foreign staffer of the humanitarian NGO Malteser International removing a Buddhist flag from outside their office. The flag had not only a religious meaning but also a political one, it was indeed placed outside many buildings in Sittwe in order to show solidarity with a campaign to omit the term "Rohingya" from the census.

More than 170 staff members from international NGOs and UN agencies were evacuated from Sittwe. Their departure left about 700,000 people, including 200,000 residents of camps for displaced persons and remote areas, mostly Rohingya, without help.

The census sponsored by the UNFPA and international donors was supposed to meet international human rights standards and to allow the identification of every ethnicity in the country.

However, despite assurances from the Myanmar government to allow for the self-identification of any ethnicity, the term Rohingya was banned just one day before the beginning of the census, leaving the Rohingya without hope to be listed as such and not as Bengali.

The failure of the pilot census held in April, the ban of MSF and the attack on international NGOs and UN agencies are imputable also to the alarm caused by the inclusion of the Rohingya in the census. For some Arakan/Rakhine State political circles like the nationalist party and national religious fanatics like the 969 Movement it was clear that the only way to oust the Rohingya from the census was to put at risk the security and the public order in Sittwe. They succeeded.

The international community watched silently, something the government had surely anticipated. All the demonstrations and rallies against international NGOs were authorized by the government which for the "public security reasons" has already blocked all manifestations concerning liberties such as the press-freedom one where a journalist was arrested and an Australian reporter deported.

The census has been a failure not just for the Rohingya but also for the other religious and ethnic minorities in the country. In Kachin State, no census has been allowed to take place in areas controlled by the Kachin Independence Organization armed group, due to security reason and in part to concerns about ethnicity data. Similar problems have been registered also in Shan State.

However, in addition to being left out from the census, the exodus of international NGOs and the restrictions imposed by the government have left the entire Rohingya population without medical care, food and clear water.

In the camps, many suffer from diarrhea, skin infections and respiratory illnesses, including tuberculosis. The Rohingya are living in cramped shelters with no ventilation located in paddy fields and lowland areas which face flooding that increases enormously the proliferation of diseases during both rainy and dry season. Despite repeated appeals by humanitarian agencies and the international community, the government of Myanmar has obstructed the allocation of adequate land for relocation sites for internationally displaced persons. Potential outbreaks of measles and cholera remain a worry. Pregnant women and children are particularly at risk.

Food and clear water provided by the government are not sufficient to satisfy the needs of the registered IDPs. The unregistered IDPs rely only on international NGOs and local charity. Now that not all the agencies have resumed their work their condition is even more dire. Women and children are the ones most affected. There are too many reports about deaths of pregnant women experiencing labor complications that could have been easily prevented with prenatal visits. The effects caused by the absence of health care is visible on the skin and bones of malnourished children and in the number of deaths.

Since the departure of MSF the Myanmar government has arranged sporadic visits to the IDP camps in order to deliver some medical help, but the Rohingya are highly traumatized and they don't trust the government doctors. Rumors about suspect Rohingyas' deaths in the Sittwe hospital have spread all around Arakan/Rakhine State. Rohingya worry Buddhist doctors and nurses will hurt or even kill them and even if it is almost impossible to prove that those death were not accidental it is necessary to recognize that the Rohingya are not treated like Buddhist patients. Rohingya are hospitalized, always for the sadly famous security reasons, in a different section of the Sittwe hospital where they have to wait ages for a doctor willing to visit a Muslim and were professional nurses are extremely rare.

Instead of cooperating with the international community in order to find a peaceful solution for the religious, political and economic conflict present in the Arakan/Rakhine State the Myanmar government is promoting discrimination and supporting anti-Muslims campaigns led by the Arakanese Nationalist party which aims to create a Buddhist army and the 969 Movement which is promoting an interfaith marriage ban.

Society for Threatened Peoples urges the Human Rights Council to call on the Government of Myanmar to:

• End immediately human rights violations and resolve the grievous situation of Muslim minorities in the country with particular emphasis on the Rohingya religious community.

• Revise legislation as necessary, in particular laws that discriminate against particular groups.

• Redraft the 1982 Citizenship Law and ensure that state policies regarding children, women and family reflect Myanmar's international obligations.

•Lead a public information campaign promoting tolerance and religious non-discrimination.

•Condemn and dispel hate speeches and propagandas against all ethnic and religious groups.

•Fully, impartially and fairly investigate and persecute those responsible for serious abuses and human rights violations against the Rohingya.

•Take action against the 969 movement and other organizations that may be implicated in anti-Muslim violence.

•Allow the access and the return to all international and national organizations to all those in need, with special focus to internally displaced person camps.